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Rhetoric and practice in pre-service teacher education: the case of Teach For America

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Teach For America (TFA), an organization that places college graduates in urban and rural classrooms for two-year terms of service, is lauded by reformers who see its five-week summer training institute as evidence that teachers have little to learn before entering classrooms. Yet, while boosters see TFA as a radical alternative to traditional teacher education, a look at the evolution of their increasingly robust summer training model hardly affirms that perception. In fact, much of what is done in the summer institute parallels the work of traditional teacher education programs in the USA – a surprising state of affairs given the rhetoric of so many TFA supporters. This project traces the evolution of TFA's summer training institute across two decades, highlighting the growing divide between TFA's outward-facing image and its actual work. Framing TFA's summer institute as a case study for examining the relationship between rhetoric and practice in education, the article raises broader questions about how the policy-making context affects the construction and perception of reality.

Keywords: history; politics

Policy-makers, op-ed columnists, and the concerned public commonly identify Teach For America (TFA) as a radical alternative to college- and university-based teacher education in the USA. After all, rather than putting novices through a year or more of coursework, TFA trains newly accepted 'corps members' in a concise five-week period through its annual summer institute and then places them for two-year teaching assignments in urban and rural schools. Thus, while those in traditional pre-service programs are still fulfilling their licensure requirements, TFA participants are earning salaries as fully-fledged classroom teachers.

Given the seeming divergence of these approaches to pre-service preparation, many in the USA have interpreted any TFA achievement as an implicit indictment of traditional teacher education. The logic here is simple: if TFA corps members are reasonably successful after having sidestepped teacher education, then such college- and university-based programs must be unnecessary. As TFA has grown in size and influence over the past quarter century, then, critics of traditional pre-service programs have increasingly framed TFA's approach to training as proof-of-concept that conventional teacher education is superfluous – a perspective that has entered the mainstream. As a 2010 article in the *Washington Post* noted, a growing number of teachers 'come from programs such as TFA, which bypass traditional education

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schools, in part because of a perception that the standard routes for teacher preparation have become less useful' (Birnbaum). And as Chubb noted in his (2012) book *The Best Schools in the World*, 'TFA recruits perform at least as well as traditionally certified teachers.' As such, 'reformers are asking if teacher licensing is necessary at all.'

Surprisingly, however, TFA's actual approach to pre-service is hardly the radical alternative that many suppose it is. Yes, TFA counts on recruits learning a great deal on the job, but their training – abbreviated though it is – hardly serves as affirmation of the belief that any smart person can walk into a classroom and begin teaching. Over the past two decades, in fact, TFA has consistently worked to improve its summer training, developing not only a coherent curriculum, but also a clear framework for lesson planning and classroom management, as well as robust systems of support, mentoring, and collaboration. In this respect, TFA's practices have squared not with anti-teacher education rhetoric in the USA so much as they have with the work of well-regarded college- and university-based programs and the scholarship of leading teacher educators.¹

This parallel is rarely publicized. Operating within a policy context in the US hostile to the so-called status quo and instead favoring entrepreneurial, common sense-style reforms, TFA's public relations department has understandably emphasized other aspects of the organization's work – often focusing, for instance, on innovative approaches to recruitment and placement (Schneider 2011). Whatever their practices, then, TFA leaders have deftly positioned the organization as a radical and innovative alternative to traditional teacher licensure programs. As such, they have grown the organization beyond all initial expectations, winning for TFA a prominent place in conversations about reforming teacher training. As a columnist in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* wrote recently, 'I am beginning to wonder why we don't disband the colleges of education and let TFA take over' (Downey 2010).

TFA, clearly, has a strong incentive to develop a training program that looks as different as possible from that conducted by departments and colleges of education. Appearing different from college- and university-based teacher education programs, after all, has been a key to TFA's success. A 2010 feature in the *Economist*, for instance, called TFA 'a political statement in and of itself, especially with regard to teacher training.' In the same piece, TFA founder Wendy Kopp (2010) stressed the 'innovative' nature of the training program. The fact, then, that her organization does much in common with traditional teacher education programs is not only interesting, but also worth considering for what it tells us about the roles of rhetoric and practice in pre-service teacher preparation policy.

This article examines the growth of TFA's summer institute from its inception to the present, documenting the evolution of TFA's training program over nearly a quarter century. What it reveals is that while TFA cultivated its image as a radical departure from traditional teacher education, and while funders and policy-makers increasingly supported the organization for this reason, TFA's actual practices moved incrementally toward the work being done at leading college- and university-based teacher education programs. As such, this work is a case study in the divide between rhetoric and practice, examining the reasons for such a divide, as well as its impact on how funders, policy-makers, and the public interpret reality.

Methodology

This article is based on qualitative research conducted with a wide range of data including archival documents and interviews. Data collection and analysis for this study – whether document-based or interview-based – was informed by historical methodology. Such work begins with what Westhoff (2012) has called historiographic mapping – developing a ‘mental map’ of the scholarship on a given topic and using that knowledge to develop research questions, as well as to make meaning from documents and interviews. And historical research is further guided by the process of contextualization – understanding ideas and actions within the broader frameworks of which they are a part – as well as by content analysis, which is characterized chiefly by the processes of corroboration and close reading (McDowell 2002; Wineburg 2001).

Much of the research for this study was shaped by the analysis of publically available and archival documents. Archival materials for the project were provided by TFA, which made available internal memos, strategic plans, curricular resources, and longitudinal data collected on factors like corps member satisfaction. TFA also provided transcribed interviews with seven key personnel involved in designing the summer institute at various points in time. These interviews were conducted by TFA personnel for the purpose of internal research and ran in length from 4 to 13 single-spaced transcribed pages. A total of 396 primary documents were made available on a restricted online data sharing system.

Given the recency of this history, as well as the importance of triangulation, this study also drew upon in-depth interviews with current- and former-TFA corps members, as well as with current- and former-TFA employees. The sampling for such interviews was purposive and criterion based – an appropriate procedure for exploring cases that illustrate key characteristics of particular subgroups (Patton 2002). Most interviews were conducted by phone (two were conducted via email) between 2008 and 2012 and responses were transcribed in note form with illustrative remarks transcribed verbatim. After a brief description of the research project, interviews generally lasted 30 min. Interviews were open-ended and conversational and met Kvale’s (1996) six quality criteria for interviews, particularly the criterion that ‘the interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subject’s answers in the course of the interview’ (145).

Formal in-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 13 subjects – seven former corps members and six current or former administrators. Initial interviews were conducted with 20 former corps members, seven of whom were selected for formal interviews based on the clarity of their recollections and the year they had participated in the summer institute – a means of tracking the development of the training model across time. Two of these corps members had participated in administrative roles, as well, which shaped the nature of those interviews. Participating corps members were found through a combination of snowball, opportunistic, and critical case sampling. Interviews were also conducted with six current and former TFA administrators with national responsibilities related to the design and implementation of the summer institute, including three with titles of Vice President or higher. These participants were found through snowball and critical case sampling. Interviewee names have been kept confidential, with the exception of highly visible leaders at the organization.

While each interview began with a discussion of an individual's role and experience with the TFA summer institute, subsequent questions were shaped by that individual's expertise and situated knowledge about the TFA training model. Questions were developed based on reviews of documents and previous interviews and were designed to generate more in-depth understandings or to offer new insights and opinions that could be confirmed through additional research. For example, when archival analysis and interviews with former corps members revealed changes in the training model after 2001, an interview was scheduled with Abigail Smith, who served as Vice President for training and support from 2001 to 2003. She was asked questions about how and why the institute curriculum changed over time.

The search for organizational identity: 1988–1993

TFA was the product of Wendy Kopp's 1988 Princeton University senior thesis. The year after her graduation, having secured funding from Union Carbide and Mobil Corporation, Kopp founded TFA to encourage undergraduates to commit two years to teaching in traditionally underserved urban and rural schools in the USA. In the fall and spring of 1989 and 1990, Kopp and her recently hired staff began recruiting college graduates. They held their first training institute in Los Angeles, California during the summer of 1990 (Kopp 2001, 47).

Kopp's vision was not to develop innovative teacher training or to prepare individuals to change the educational system. Instead, it was simply 'to prepare them to do the best possible job during the two years they would be teaching' (Kopp 1989, 2), and to do so as quickly as possible. Short on time and working with an inexperienced staff, she and her team cobbled together many of the materials standard to the kinds of programs for which TFA was an alternative, even seeking out assistance from the likes of the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Vito Perrone. As TFA employee Smith (2008) later recalled, the organization relied on those 'who were already engaged in education, doing this stuff, from traditional teacher ed worlds.' Of course, as TFA's mission evolved, so would its relationship with those worlds.

In its first years, however, leaders at TFA had very little capacity for assembling their own training program and a strong set of incentives for aligning themselves with college- and university-based programs. Consequently, their training resembled a loosely organized collection of standard teacher education materials. One participant in the LA summer institute, for instance, recalled in an interview with the author that organizers 'ham-fistedly' threw 'a bunch of things together,' including Madeline Hunter's six-step lesson plan and works by the likes of Lisa Delpit and Jonathan Kozol. The corps member handbook, which was designed to provide a foundation in education research, was a mere 24 pages long. The handbook was supplemented by photocopies of articles, but as a participant in the first summer institute recalled, articles were generally 'about social issues and not how to be a good teacher.'

The organization of coursework in the institute was also problematic. In the afternoon, corps members would return to their dorms for seminars and discussion groups designed to stimulate thinking about teaching in underserved communities. Structure, however, was weak and tensions were often 'so high that lectures escalated into free-for-alls' with corps members verbally attacking each other and 'usually harass[ing] the guest lecturer as well' (Kopp 2001, 50). One participant

recalled in an interview with the author that she was ‘very disappointed in the content presenters,’ noting that ‘many people stopped showing up; people who knew what they were doing and were motivated worked on their own.’

The assignments corps members were asked to complete matched the seminars in lack of structure and inconsistency of quality. Many exercises focused on team-building rather than teaching – a source of frustration for some corps members. Like students in traditional licensure programs, participants were given assignments that they were expected to complete by the end of the institute. Yet, without any real guidance or accountability, many simply did not finish them. Corps members, for instance, were asked to keep a journal, but were given little direction as to how they should approach their journal assignments. And the culminating project for the institute – a portfolio that asked participants to present understandings of their students, routines, curriculum development, classroom management, assessment, and parent involvement, prompted little feedback, as two former corps members recalled.

Mimicking another aspect of traditional teacher education, TFA also placed corps members in classrooms as student teachers – in this case, doing so in Los Angeles, where public schools were operating on a year-round basis. To corps member disappointment, however, there were few systems in place for making this experience consistently worthwhile, and participants were formally observed only once during their student teaching experiences. As one corps member recalled in an interview with the author, participants received only anecdotal feedback that was ‘not based on standards or benchmarks.’ And as Kopp (2001) recalled, there was little oversight, and ‘there were significant inconsistencies among the 500 master teachers’ (94). Some corps members managed to find their own ways of getting feedback, by getting fellow participants to observe them or by asking peers to look over their lesson plans. Still, there were few systematic supports to shore up these informal professional learning networks.

All of this led Wendy Kopp to believe that the institute design was too loosely structured. ‘Our instructions to faculty members, whom we had not even met prior to the institute,’ she wrote, ‘consisted of a page-long list of the topics they were expected to cover and the theses they should reinforce’ (Kopp 2001, 57). The quality of the training varied widely, and participants reported that the TFA staff had not ‘set accurate expectations … given them adequate training … [or] provid[ed] sufficient professional development’ (Kopp 2001, 57). The staff resolved to more carefully vet and train potential institute faculty as well as to create ‘a more manageable training structure’ (Kopp 2001, 57).

If TFA wanted to prepare corps members for success – something the organization would need to make a claim on if it were to ensure its future – the summer institute would need to go beyond corporate team-building exercises and better prepare novices for their two years in the classroom. Leaders at TFA decided that they needed a more structured approach to student teaching with better systems for observation and feedback, a more coherent curriculum, and a means of systematically introducing novices to the profession. A closer look at college- and university-based teacher education programs, it seemed, had something to offer TFA’s leaders in redesigning the summer institute.

Outwardly, however, TFA was beginning to craft a very different sort of message about the need for alternative forms of entry into the profession. Kopp, particularly, had a strong sense of what potential backers of TFA were interested in hearing. Consequently, she began making the case that recruiting top students from elite

colleges and universities was a silver bullet for the woes of urban and rural schools – a common-sense approach to educational reform that had significant traction among funders and policy-makers in the USA (Schneider 2011). As she observed in a 1990 interview: ‘I think what sells this to people is the fact that it’s so simple and obvious’ (Kopp 1990).

Training corps members was important, certainly; and it was clear that TFA was willing to look to teacher education programs for successful practices. But given the financial questions facing a fledgling organization, Kopp realized that presenting a compelling image to funders was a priority. As she would later recall: ‘We realized the only way out of this mess was to raise money’ (Kopp 2010). And raising money – to say nothing of appealing to reform-minded policy-makers in the USA – meant rejecting the teacher education ‘establishment.’ In her words: ‘in the context of deeply entrenched problems that many people have given up on, it helps to not have a traditional framework’ (Kopp 2010).

Borrowing practices and developing a message: 1994–1996

Among the many changes that TFA made to its summer institute in those early years, perhaps the most important was a product of its move from Los Angeles to Houston, Texas in 1994. Although working in Los Angeles had given corps members a chance to student teach in a regular school year setting – just like traditional licensure programs – it also posed significant challenges. The most significant of those was that teachers were often reluctant to give up their classrooms to lightly-trained novices. Consequently, many corps members were never the lead instructors in the classroom. And, as a result, they never experienced success or failures entirely on their own merit.

Corps members in Houston were placed in summer school classrooms, the lower stakes of which allowed them to assume leadership without raising as many immediate concerns among more experienced teachers. The official responsibility for the class resided with a Houston public schools teacher called a faculty advisor, who was charged with overseeing two classrooms. But in this more relaxed environment, corps members were able to do more work in lesson planning, teaching, and managing classrooms than they had in Los Angeles.

Still, corps members did not immediately take over their own classrooms. Instead, they worked in collaborative groups of three or four, sharing the workload of planning and instruction, and often teaching for small blocks of time and then rotating. Only by the end of the summer institute did corps members plan for and teach full days on their own. In addition to easing corps members into the work of teaching, the collaborative had the added benefit of allowing them a wider observational experience – watching others within the collaborative, as well as spending time outside of their classrooms observing teachers.

As had been the case during the Los Angeles summer institutes, Houston corps members continued to spend afternoons in professional development sessions with TFA staff and alumni, and evenings in workshops and lesson-planning meetings (Kopp 2001, 95). But the institute had been run several times by this point, and TFA was learning from experience and adopting many of the practices recommended by leading teacher educators.

Whereas in Los Angeles corps members had been evaluated only once per week, they were evaluated in Houston by veteran teachers and by a new set of

actors – corps member advisors (CMAs) – who met with them on a daily basis (Shteir 1996). Those CMAs, drawn largely from the ranks of former corps members, not only conducted class observations, but also led many of the workshops. As a result, they more effectively matched coursework with practice teaching. Further, as CMAs were only recently removed from their own summer institute experiences, they more easily related to the experiences of corps members in training. Corps members were also given the opportunity to meet more frequently in peer groups organized by their regional placements – an effort to promote a sense of interconnectedness among them.

The introduction of more thorough feedback mechanisms and support systems was a breakthrough for TFA, but not entirely novel. As early as the 1980s, for instance, scholars in US teacher education began writing about the importance of mentoring for novices (Galvez-Hjornevik 1986; Gray and Gray 1985; Kram 1985). And by the 1990s, it was widely accepted among teacher educators that ‘serious mentoring is ... crucial for the development of teachers who learn to practice effectively rather than merely to cope’ (Darling-Hammond 1995, 22). Similarly, other scholars had begun discussing the importance of peer support, particularly interdependency, shared concerns, and a sense of common fate (Glidewell et al. 1983; Howey and Zimpher 1989). Whatever the origin of such ideas, though, the implementation of them represented a significant step forward for the summer institute.

Despite these changes, however, the institute still had problems. While the student teaching experience and the feedback mechanisms had been changed, the institute’s curriculum remained vulnerable to criticism. As had been the case in Los Angeles, participants in the Houston summer institute recalled the materials feeling somewhat thin, the instruction being inconsistent, and the resource centers understocked. Much of the curricular focus remained on effective goal-setting strategies – a manifestation of TFA’s orientation toward business management – rather than on the development of skills like effective instruction or understanding of child development. Corps members continued to feel that they had not done enough fieldwork before arriving in their own classrooms in their placement cities (Shteir 1996). And according to an external evaluator, some institute leaders felt that corps members needed more guidance in lesson design and pedagogy, stronger understanding of child and adolescent development, and more exposure to theories of teaching (Roth 1993).

On top of all that, criticism from skeptical academics was sometimes severe, drawing negative attention to a fledgling organization. In a 1994 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, for instance, Linda Darling-Hammond portrayed TFA as a fly-by-night operation that would further harm urban students and de-professionalize teaching. TFA’s training, she added, had ‘no systematic curriculum, no continuous faculty, no guaranteed resources for student learning, and no quality control over school placements, mentoring, or assessment’ (Darling-Hammond 1994, 22). And, as she concluded: ‘TFA is built on a set of assumptions and practices that will prevent it from ever being an adequate or responsible method of preparing teachers’ (28).

The organization, clearly, had to rebut such criticisms, and might have pointed to its improved summer institute – or even reached out to leaders in teacher education for guidance. Yet, TFA was beginning to gain serious traction among philanthropists and policy-makers by presenting itself as an entrepreneurial organization intent on disrupting the status quo (Schneider 2011). As former site director Kevin Hall

recalled, TFA's willingness 'to look outside of the conventional public school system' was 'resonant' with funders. As Timothy Knowles, the first director of TFA's New York office, recalled, one foundation donated office space to TFA because 'they liked [that] we were young and entrepreneurial' (Schneider 2011). Thus, rather than align itself with college- and university-based teacher education, as it had early on, TFA faced a powerful set of incentives to cast its work as a significant departure from mainstream teacher preparation.

The summer institute, however, continued to evolve in a way that made it look like *less* of a departure. By 1996, TFA had developed yet another new curriculum. As Kopp (2001) recalled, the curriculum was designed 'with more of a road map for success instead of simply exposing [corps members] to a variety of strategies for instruction, classroom management, and the like' (141). TFA also began to adjust their supports around student teaching. Specifically, they began asking corps members to develop reflection skills and emphasized the development of collegial relationships among them – another move that placed the organization in line with the recommendations of leading teacher educators (Schön 1987; Zeichner and Liston 1987).

TFA also instituted new systems around observation and feedback. Because the collaborative model entirely freed faculty advisors from their teaching responsibilities, it also allowed for greater feedback about teaching. Each day, CMAs observed corps members, and each afternoon led discussion groups with their assigned collaboratives. And once each week, faculty advisors would meet with corps members individually to provide more detailed feedback. Still, as one evaluator saw it, faculty advisors often gave more feedback than novices could handle and frequently failed to make connections between their observations and other work being done at the institute. As a result, it limited the effectiveness of those sessions (Richardson, Griego-Jones, and Langer 1996, 11).

Overall, corps members responded positively to the changes made to the institute. They appreciated more structured training from CMAs, who led instructional seminars each afternoon. And, as one former corps member recalled in an interview with the author, they appreciated the opportunity to talk with each other and to commiserate about their challenges. Additionally, CMA mentors were increasingly helpful to corps members as resources. Though they for the most part had taught for only two years, they had similar enough and practical enough experiences to be perceived as useful.

Ultimately, despite the significant advancements, there remained gaps in TFA's training. Although the institute was more focused than its predecessors, organizational goals remained somewhat fractured and no curricular core existed. Exacerbating this was the fact that curricular material continued to be covered at what some considered to be a superficial level and was often unrelated to classroom practice. As a result, corps members, according to a 1996 evaluation, 'seemed frustrated in trying to integrate information from curriculum seminars into the classroom' (Richardson, Griego-Jones, and Langer 1996, 15). These, of course, were classic problems of traditional teacher training programs, where novices grew frustrated with programmatic fragmentation and loose connections between theory and practice (Edmundson 1989).

But TFA faced the unique challenge of trying to cover this 'massive amount of material' in a dramatically shorter period of time (Richardson, Griego-Jones, and Langer 1996, 19). It is not entirely surprising, then, that a survey of teachers trained

in the mid-1990s found that TFA corps members rated their training significantly lower on ‘overall preparation to teach’ than did graduates of even the lowest rated teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Frelow 2002, 291). Thus, while external incentives may have driven TFA leaders to craft a message about the irrelevance of teacher preparation, internal success required a continuing commitment to improving pre-service training.

Thinking outside (and inside) the box: 1997–2000

Much of the TFA summer institute remained the same as the century wound to an end. The program continued to be five weeks long with the central experience being that of teaching summer classes in Houston elementary and middle schools, and corps members continued to receive extensive feedback and training in the afternoons and evenings. Corps members continued to be supported by CMAs, faculty advisors, and a TFA school-level director. And days typically ended with all collaborative teams and all CMAs meeting together with the school director. Evening hours in the University of Houston dorms were filled with preparations for the next day, meetings, guest speakers, and optional workshops.

But rather than creating ‘outside the box’ solutions for the problem of preparing teachers, as one might have expected from TFA’s entrepreneurial image, the organization increasingly pursued solutions that had been suggested by teacher educators. One key move in this regard was tightening the connection between the training curriculum and the student teaching experience – a need earlier identified by both corps members and external evaluators (Darling-Hammond 1994). The TFA *Guidebook*, for instance – a resource that debuted in 1997 and was thoroughly revised for the 1998 institute – was a deliberate step in trying to connect theory to practice by developing a usable knowledge base and by grounding materials in real situations. As an internal TFA document put it, the effort was to ‘more tightly connect the theory presented to the actual execution’ (Teach For America 2005a, 19). And by 1999, the framework established by the *Guidebook* had been integrated across all aspects of the institute, including classroom observations, resource rooms, workshops, and afternoon sessions (Teach For America 2005a, 19).

TFA also began leveraging its centralized structure to do what many observers of traditional teacher education programs had identified as an imperative for pre-service training. Goodlad (1990), for instance, had long argued that teacher education programs should develop systems to evaluate their work based on data. And other scholars had been equally direct about the importance of programmatic alignment. As Suzanne Wilson and colleagues summed up: ‘research shows that field experiences too often are disconnected from, or not well coordinated with, the university-based components of teacher education’ (2001, ii). Thus, by working to align its training program – from reading assignments to practice teaching – around a clear measurable goal, TFA was moving to bring some order to the process of training teachers.

Despite the fact that such work was often portrayed by critics as irrelevant for effective instruction, and despite the fact that it was often unpopular among corps members, the summer institute also continued to emphasize traditional teacher education topics like learning theory and the sociocultural context of schooling. As one corps member retrospectively complained: ‘the majority of discussion dealt with cultural sensitivity and how we felt about diversity’ (Ness 2004). And as another

corps member griped: ‘My group spent hours on an activity where everyone stood in a line and then took steps forward or backward based on whether we were the oppressor or the oppressed in the categories of race, income, and religion’ (Kaplowitz 2003). Yet designers of the institute, much like designers of traditional teacher education programs, had come to view training in particular beliefs and mindsets to be essential for raising student achievement in underserved schools.

But while the summer institute was moving in the direction advocated by leading teacher educators, TFA was also developing new systems of its own. Most notably, the *Guidebook* introduced TFA’s key concept of ‘significant gains,’ which quantifiably defined student achievement in a manner that would allow for greater internal coherence of the training. This, of course, was emphasized to funders as a part of what TFA called its ‘total quality management’ approach. As a later fundraising document would put it: ‘while this “significant gains” measure is not intended to be an externally-validated measure, it enables us to make internal, data-driven programmatic improvements’ (Teach For America 2007). But whatever the image TFA was cultivating for funders and policy-makers, effective corporate governance was being combined with increasing emphasis on pre-service training – even if that training was limited to five weeks.

Contradictions in rhetoric and practice: 2001–2005

In 2001, TFA opened a second institute in New York City, adding a third in 2003 by reopening in Los Angeles. Internally, change was equally substantial.

In 2001 Steven Farr, a 1993 corps member, joined the TFA staff as Vice President of Training and Support (later to become Chief Knowledge Officer). A year later, the organization hired former corps member and Harvard Graduate School of Education student Andrew Mandel to be Director of Curriculum Development. In their separate positions, the two led the development of an even more structured curriculum built around the central idea that successful teachers engage in specific classroom practices and, like habits, they can be taught. In 2002, the *Guidebook* was replaced with a set of handbooks designed by Farr, Mandel, and others (Smith 2008).

The new curriculum was not a complete overhaul. Handbooks continued to cover typical traditional teacher education fare like lesson planning, learning theory, and the impact of race and class in education. Materials on what would later be called ‘Diversity, Community and Achievement,’ for instance, examined sociocultural issues that teachers may encounter in their placements, balancing research with personal narrative. Such materials, which were for several years given out as ‘supplemental readings,’ included work by Sonia Nieto, Gloria Ladson-Billings, Lisa Delpit, and Pedro Noguera, as well as Peggy McIntosh’s text ‘White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.’ A note in the curriculum guide encouraged corps members ‘to reflect on how their own personal biases – and the dynamics of difference that play out in the classroom – may affect their quest for significant academic gains for all students’ (Teach For America 2003a, 4).

Like the materials on diversity, TFA’s ‘Learning Theory’ booklet was not as obviously tied to the organization’s ultimate aim of significant academic gains. In fact, the manual, which featured the likes of Jean Piaget, Benjamin Bloom, and Howard Gardner, reflected many of the readings done in traditional teacher edu-

tion programs in the USA. Still, it remained a feature of the institute curriculum. TFA quite easily could have dropped these materials by making the case that they did not square with their new framework; and surveys indicate that such a move would have been well-received among corps members (Teach For America 2004). Further, TFA had established itself as durable and well-regarded organization and no longer needed to mimic traditional teacher education in order to shore up its legitimacy. Surprisingly, however, TFA did the opposite. Rather than dropping such materials, leaders at the organization worked to align them with the new curriculum framework – a signal that TFA's leadership believed in the importance of such materials, even if many of their boosters took a different stance.

Most of this went unpublicized by TFA. That is, with the exception of the 'Teaching As Leadership' framework, which was introduced in 2002. Focused on the 'overarching approach of successful teachers in low-income communities' (Teach For America, Los Angeles n.d.), it was structured around selected research, the experiences of former corps members, and practical tools that young teachers could use in their classrooms – a blend of traditional teacher education curricula and more corporate-inspired leadership training materials. Otherwise, however, the organization downplayed any adjustments to its training model.

TFA continued to promote its 'research-based' coursework, 'performance-based' rubric for evaluating corps members, and 'standards-based system of goal-setting' (Teach For America 2005c). Mostly, however, leaders at the organization worked to establish TFA as a mold-breaker with regard to teacher training by positioning the Teaching As Leadership framework at the center of their program. A 2005 brochure, for instance, classified summer institute coursework as being 'designed around our theory of Teaching As Leadership, based on strategies used by some of the nation's most successful teachers' (Teach For America 2005c). And the TFA 'Program overview' webpage that year focused exclusively on the Teaching As Leadership framework. To an outsider, then, it might have seemed that TFA had reinvented pre-service preparation, distilling it into five highly concentrated weeks focused on leadership.

Meanwhile, however, TFA continued to make many of the same moves as leading teacher education programs, often quite explicitly. In a 2011 interview with the author, Andrew Mandel recalled being strongly influenced by the work of his Harvard Graduate School of Education professors – scholars like Richard Elmore and Robert Kegan. And as [Mandel](#) wrote in his draft of TFA's 2003 Institute Plan:

Based on some of the big-picture take-aways from our 2002 Institute Debriefing, our review of Stanford's Teacher Education Program, and our review of several respected sets of teacher-quality standards, I'm convinced that our three overarching goals with corps members can be categorized in terms of Theory, Practice, and Reflection. (Teach For America 2003b, 3)

TFA also worked to develop training around the concept of pedagogical content knowledge – a major topic of discussion in departments and colleges of education. In a 2003 memo, Mandel made the case that “pedagogical content knowledge” remains one of the major gaps in TFA's summer training program' (Teach For America 2003b, 65). The institute, he observed, still did little to give corps members the knowledge ‘that our own realizations, current research, and exemplary schools of education now all point to as so critical to effective teaching’ (65).

As the summer institute was quietly looking more and more like teacher education programs at rigorous departments and colleges of education, corps members continued to respond more positively to it. In 2003, 57% of corps members responded that they felt the summer institute had prepared them ‘as well as possible to be successful in [their] first year teaching responsibilities’ – a five point increase from the year before. And in 2004 and 2005, 73 and 71% of corps members, respectively, responded in the affirmative to that statement (Teach For America 2005b). Such self-reports, certainly, are not perfect measures of programmatic quality. Yet, corps member satisfaction certainly meant something to leaders at TFA – a sign that, whatever the rhetoric, more robust pre-service preparation was important to the organization.

The myth of a radical alternative: 2006–2012

In 2006, the summer institute expanded to five national locations, re-opening in New York after having moved that campus to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and adding a new site in Atlanta, Georgia. With growing public acclaim and financial support, the organization began to expand at an even more rapid pace (Schneider 2011). And by 2011, they had opened their ninth training institute in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which joined other recent additions in Phoenix (Arizona), Chicago (Illinois), and the Mississippi Delta. By that time, the regional institutes were funneling roughly 5000 new corps members each year to over 40 different placement sites.

Much of the political support that enabled such growth, of course, was the product of a simple belief: that TFA was a radical and preferable alternative to traditional college- and university-based teacher education. In 2006, the organization won a *Fast Company/Monitor Group Social Capitalist* award for combining ‘creativity and ingenuity with business solutions to address the most challenging social problems today’ (Teach For America 2005d). The ingenuity that TFA was credited with was its ability to recruit talented undergraduates from prestigious colleges. As a 2006 *Fortune* magazine article noted, roughly 10% of the senior classes at Yale, Dartmouth, Columbia, Duke, and the University of Chicago applied to the program that year (Sellers 2006). And insofar as training was ever mentioned, it was often as a means of distinguishing TFA from college- and university-based teacher training. As Kristof asserted in a 2006 *New York Times* column, programs like TFA ‘have brought outstanding young people into teaching without putting them through conventional training programs, and those teachers have been widely hailed as first-rate.’ Yet as this history indicates, claims like that are somewhat misleading.

There is no such thing as ‘conventional’ teacher education. There are, after all, roughly 1200 different institutions engaging in the pre-service preparation of teachers, all of which bring different organizational components and philosophical emphases to bear (Wiens 2012). Still, much of TFA’s pre-service preparation program is ‘conventional’ in the sense that it overlaps with the practices of college- and university-based teacher education. TFA emphasizes the sociocultural context of schooling, educational psychology, and more theoretical aspects of pedagogy – hardly radical departures from the work done in licensure programs. And over the years TFA has implemented many of the improvements advocated for by reform-minded teacher educators in the USA: peer networks, mentoring structures, reflection cycles, data systems, and an internally aligned curriculum (Darling-Hammond et al. 2007; Grossman,

Hamerness, and McDonald 2009; Smith and Ingersoll 2004; Wilson et al. 2001; Zeichner and Conklin 2008).

There are certainly particular aspects of the TFA training model that are unique to the organization. Much of what they do reflects an entrepreneurial, corporate ethos – emphasizing leadership, goal-setting, and management strategy. Materials on ‘Instructional Planning and Development,’ for instance, rely on a particular ‘goal-oriented’ and ‘standards-based’ approach that asks novices to diagnose and assess students in order to plan instruction. The organization’s emphasis on data provides another example. As one internal memo phrased it:

Using short-cycle management techniques with biweekly targets, we heavily focused our conversations with corps members on classroom data and pushed to shift more and more corps members from one sig gains bucket to the next (on the premise that applying management discipline to the task of advancing student learning would lead to more student learning). (Teach For America 2012)

Such emphases are not common in college- and university-based programs, and have proven popular with funders in the business community (Schneider 2011).

TFA’s training program is also somewhat distinct in the heavy emphasis it has placed on the practical. Using works like Doug Lemov’s *Teach Like a Champion*, TFA staff have responded to the yearning among novice teachers for tips and tricks to help them survive their first days and weeks in classrooms. Consequently, the summer institute leans heavily toward instruction in managing classes, asking questions, and dozens of other habitual practices of experienced teachers.

Yet, despite these small points of distinction, much of TFA’s training model has come to resemble the work done by departments and colleges of education – a change apparently driven by a concern with programmatic effectiveness. And there is some evidence that they are making progress. In 2009, for instance, roughly 80% of corps members indicated in internal surveys that TFA lesson planning clinics, CMA sessions, and co-investigation conversations with CMAs had been helpful in their development as teachers (Teach For America 2009a, 5). And 60% of participants responded positively to the traditionally low-rated diversity, community, and achievement materials (Teach For America 2009b). Today, corps member satisfaction with the summer institute rivals that of traditional teacher education programs (Cohen-Vogel and Smith 2007; Darling-Hammond, Hudson, and Kirby 1989; Zientek 2007).

Still, TFA can only do a fraction of what traditional teacher education programs do, given their brief five week window. The brevity of their training is the product of necessity, brought about by the fact that TFA corps members commit to teach for only two years. But it was once also a product of philosophy – a manifestation of the belief that bright and energetic novices could be quickly prepared for classroom success. That, however, no longer appears to be the case, and TFA employees refer internally to the ‘dirty little secret’ that great teachers cannot be produced in such a short period (Lewis 2008). Limits on TFA’s growth, then, may send a powerful message about how long it takes to prepare a teacher to enter a classroom ready for work.

Not surprisingly, given such limitations, most research indicates that traditionally licensed teachers outperform TFA corps members (Heilig and Jez 2010). Still, TFA participants outperform other alternatively certified teachers – something that seems

to speak to changes in the TFA model over time (Heilig and Jez 2010). Research also indicates that TFA corps members who stay in classrooms long enough to become fully credentialed are roughly as effective as traditionally prepared teachers. Nevertheless, attrition rates are generally such that few TFA corps members remain in classrooms after three years (Boyd et al. 2006).

It may seem, then, that TFA is a kind of teacher education ‘lite’ – an abridged version of the real thing. And to some extent that is true. Yet, it is also worth noting that TFA has seemingly demonstrated the importance of a feature largely absent from departments and colleges of education: programmatic alignment. And, though college- and university-based programs do much that TFA – as a result of time limits – cannot, it may also be that TFA does something in *its* training that traditional licensure programs should consider.

Unlike most traditional pre-service programs, TFA has the advantage of being a vertically integrated organization controlling all aspects of teacher production. It trains those providing instruction to corps members as well as those conducting classroom observations, and ensures that their messages are consistent and interrelated. In part, this is done by selecting corps alumni and then cycling them through various positions. Leaders in the organization’s front office, like Farr and Mandel, are former corps members. Summer institute site directors and program directors are drawn from TFA’s pool of young alumni. And those working most closely with corps members – the CMAs who conduct observations, teach workshops on topics like lesson planning, and run reflection sessions – are frequently only one or two years removed from their own summer institute trainings. But it is also a product of a hub-and-spoke approach to management in which design is done centrally and adjusted regionally.

Departments and colleges of education in the USA are organized quite differently. As Zeichner and Conklin (2008) have observed, in the ‘horizontal staffing pattern’ used frequently in college- and university-based programs, teacher educators ‘focus only on one piece of the teacher education curriculum.’ Consequently, ‘candidates meet a different group of teacher educators at each floor who often do not communicate with each other about the contents of the different floors. The result is often a fragmented curriculum’ (280). TFA, by contrast, has utilized its centralized structure to align its programs and create an enviable sense of internal coherence. In so doing, it has developed several of the structural components identified by scholars as critical in addressing these concerns, including control over field experiences and integration among courses and between coursework and clinical work (Darling-Hammond 2006; Grossman et al. 2008). Those are promising practices worth considering.

Critics, certainly, will insist that the data on TFA corps member performance indicate that the organization has little to teach college- and university-based educators. In fact, even an internal TFA document noted that ‘not nearly enough of our corps members are leading their students to achieve significant academic gains, and the variability of our corps members’ impact on students is far too great’ (Teach For America 2009a, 9). Yet as impartial observers, we must imagine what TFA’s training model would look like *without* such programmatic alignment, which by all indications has been essential in the improvement of the summer institute. Thus, however educators feel about TFA, at least one piece of their training model seems worth investigating further for its applications in college- and university-based programs.

The evolution of TFA summer institute, then, might prompt several different conversations. It might encourage skeptics of teacher education to reconsider aspects of pre-service teacher training that seem to them irrelevant. It might inspire leaders at college- and university-based programs to consider how they might create more internally aligned programs with stronger connections between coursework and practice teaching. And it might spur questions within TFA, as well as among policy-makers, about what exactly can be accomplished in five weeks of training. Yet the conversation that dominates is far more singular and far less nuanced, with TFA supporters on the one hand claiming that pre-service training is unnecessary, and TFA critics on the other hand claiming that their training is too short to accomplish anything. Neither group discusses the actual training practices of the organization.

Conclusion

Over the course of two decades, TFA has continually focused on overhauling its training program. In so doing, it has brought to life many recommendations from scholars in the field and has often explicitly looked at the practices of leading teacher education programs. Yet, this usually goes unmentioned by TFA boosters and officials working to situate the organization within a different kind of narrative. Typical is the description offered in a report from the Center for American Progress, that TFA ‘focuses on recruitment, selection, and support services for outstanding recent college graduates who commit to teach for two years in underserved rural and urban communities’ (Gatlin 2008, 14). No mention is made of pre-service training in such descriptions, despite TFA’s clear internal focus on it. And that is hardly an accident.

For its part, TFA has perpetuated this misconception about the role of pre-service training. While others have painted teacher education as irrelevant, TFA has left unspoken the evolution of their summer institute and any parallels with traditional college- and university-based programs, even if those programs have been run out of prestigious schools like Stanford or Harvard, and understandably so. Working within an entrepreneurially-inclined policy context, leaders at TFA have had every incentive to differentiate their training model from that of ‘conventional’ teacher education, even as their practices became increasingly similar.

This divide between rhetoric and practice may seem an issue of no great consequence. After all, TFA pursued its own internal interests – creating an increasingly robust, and in some cases quite traditional-looking, pre-service teacher preparation program – despite the need to craft a very different outward-facing image. Thus, the policy context may appear at first glance to have had no real impact on practice.

Yet, it is hardly a matter of minor significance that instead of seeing TFA’s work as a case for the *importance* of pre-service teacher preparation, many influential funders and policy-makers have seen TFA’s work as doing precisely the opposite. Over the past quarter century, TFA has implicitly made a powerful case for why traditional forms of teacher preparation are hardly the congested, whimsical, and incoherent caricatures they are often portrayed as. And internal concern at TFA about the brevity of the summer institute seems to implicitly undermine the argument that college- and university-based programs are bloated and overwrought. But such implicit arguments have had little influence on policy talk because they are largely invisible, at least when compared with an aggressively-promoted image that fits so well with what many funders and policy-makers wish to hear.

As the story of TFA's practices suggests, the real conversation inspired by their training model should be about how various programs – 'alternative' and otherwise – can learn from each other. TFA has certainly learned a great deal from scholars in teacher education and from exemplary pre-service teacher preparation programs. And leaders in college- and university-based teacher education might learn something, as well, from TFA's practices. That, however, is not the conversation that is taking place. Because, as this case seems to indicate, ideologically-informed rhetoric shapes not only how people approach policy questions, but also how reality is assembled for their consumption. To put it another way: we do not see the complex realities of practice; we see a world constructed by words.

Note

1. For the purposes of this study, leading teacher education programs are those in line with best practices recommended by the scholarly literature. See, for example, L. Darling-Hammond, ed., *Studies of excellence in teacher education*. Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education. Some programs, like that at Stanford University, are referenced by name, primarily because they are mentioned specifically by TFA staff. The program at Stanford is also 'well-regarded' in the sense that it has been ranked consistently near the top of US News and World Report's crude but influential system.

Notes on contributor

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